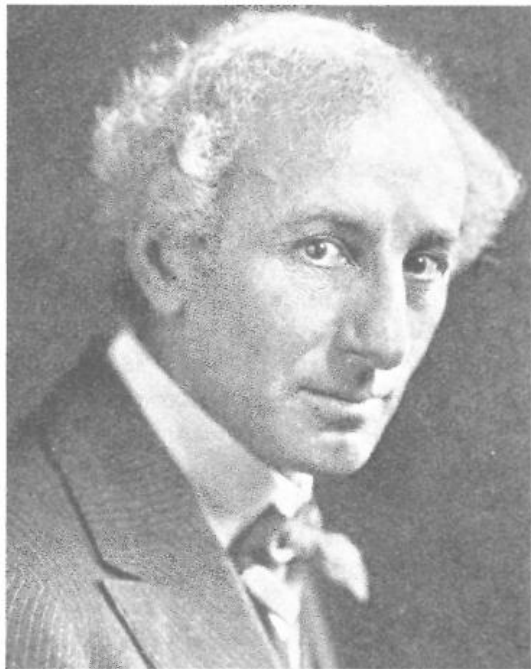


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Robert C. Spencer, Jr.
1864-1953

Sporting a bow tie as his good friend Frank Lloyd Wright often did, Robert Closson Spencer, Jr., is perhaps best known for his association with the Prairie School architects working in Chicago between 1890 and 1917. However, a bow tie was not all these two men had in common. Wright and Spencer were designing in traditional modes in the 1890s and quickly transformed their architectural ideals to a simpler, organic style, which was clearly influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement. In addition, both were interested in designs for distinctive homes of moderate cost. It is within this context that one must view Spencer's primary Maine commission, a house of moderate cost for William W. Robinson of Bath (Figure 1).



Figure 1. William Robinson House, Bath, 1991 view (MHPC).

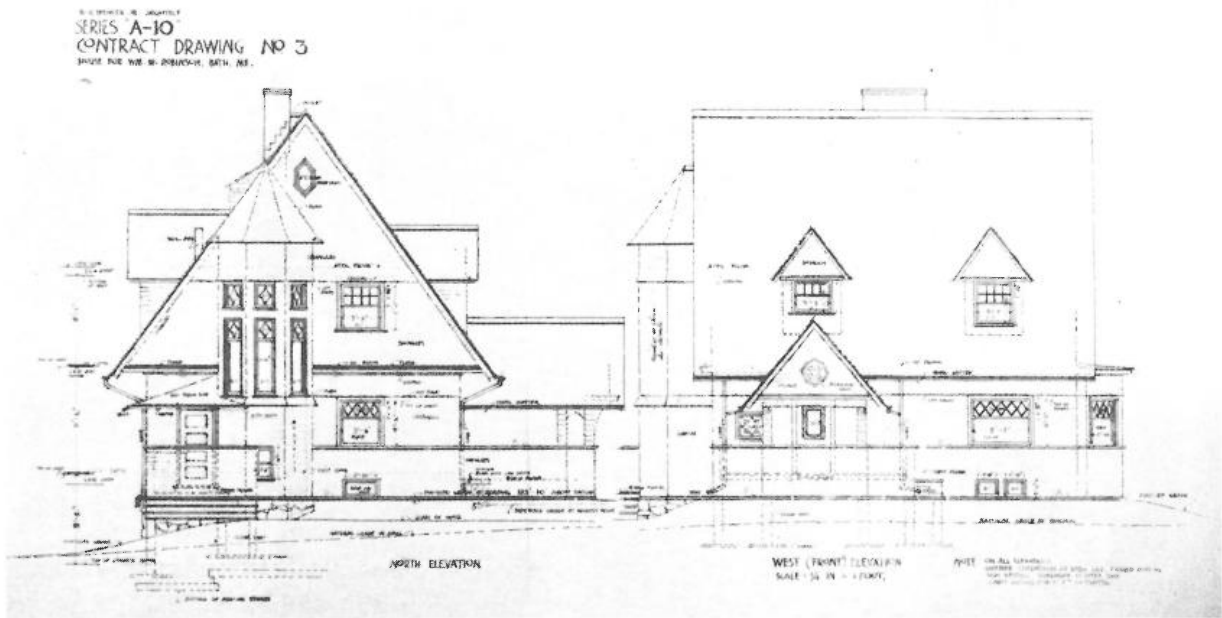


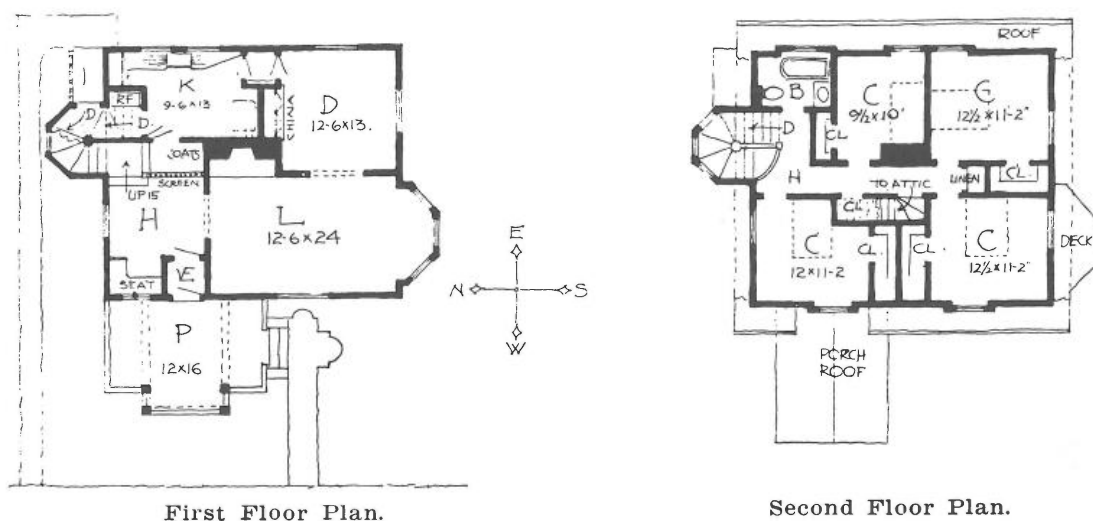
Figure 2. North and West Elevations of the William Robinson House, Bath, 1897 (Courtesy of William E. Hill).

Born on April 13, 1864, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the son of Robert and Ellen Spencer, Robert C. Spencer, Jr., was educated in local grammar and high schools. After graduation from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in mechanical engineering in 1886, Spencer studied architecture as a special student at M.I.T. in the fall of 1887 and the spring of 1888.¹

Following study at M.I.T., Spencer worked as a draftsman in Boston for the firm of Wheelwright & Haven in 1889 and then for Shepley, Rutan, & Coolidge in 1890.² In 1891 Spencer was awarded the eighth M.I.T. Rotch scholarship and travelled in Europe until 1893, when he moved to Chicago,

working again for Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge on the Chicago Public Library and Art Institute projects. By 1895 Spencer had his own practice in the Schiller Building, where Wright was working, and in 1896-97 they helped to form the lively Steinway Hall group of architects. These architects, working in the same loft and sharing a secretary, inspired one another in what they believed to be an ideal artistic setting. They also supported one another in various architectural periodicals. For example, Spencer wrote the first major article about Wright's work in a 1900 issue of *The Architectural Review*.³

A commission in Bath may seem unusual for this Chicago-based architect, but Spencer had married



TYPE B.

Figure 3. First and Second Floor Plans of the Robinson House, 1912 drawing (*The Architectural Record*).

Ernestine Elliot of Bath on November 28, 1889. This provides the probable link with the Maine city where William W. Robinson was a clerk in a dry goods store and later the owner of a similar business on Center Street.⁴

The Robinson House of 1897 is distinguished by a steep gable roof and a gabled entrance porch on the front elevation. The facade has two gabled dormers and one large diamond paned window on the second story. The entrance porch has tapered posts and a distinctive medallion in the gable peak which must have been inspired by the decoration of Louis Sullivan. The gable end on the north elevation features an engaged octagonal tower and several small windows with diamond paned sash, as well as a string course of saw tooth shingles which runs across the tower and gable peak (Figure 2).

The rear elevation has one centrally-located chimney and two central shed dormers, flanked by gabled dormers. Below the molded cornice, the first story has three diamond paned windows and one central one-over-one window. Unifying the whole house is a white string course which runs under the window sills of all the first story windows on each elevation.

In the August, 1912, issue of *The Architectural Record*, a publication which had lay as well as professional readers, Spencer published an article entitled "Building the House of Moderate Cost".⁵ In this article Spencer described housing which utilized basic forms and eliminated wasted space. Unlike his contemporary Wright, who was well-known for going over budget even on his moderate-cost designs, Spencer seemed willing to accommodate his clients' financial limits. Featured were six variations of moderate-cost housing, among which was plan B, the design for the Robinson House (Figure 3).

Although the house was shingled like so many Maine summer cottages, Spencer was quick to point out that these designs were for houses, not cottages. With this in mind, the Robinson House must be seen as a plan for a moderate-cost house adapted to the idiom of the Eastern seaboard and not a Shingle Style design. Had the house been built in suburban Chicago, it could have been half-timbered, clapboarded, or stuccoed. Aside from the shingled exterior, the steep roof and diamond pane windows demonstrate Spencer's lifelong interest in English design. As H. Allen Brooks points out in *The Prairie School*, Spencer "was particularly prone to English antecedents and the Tudor half-timbering", particularly as seen in the work of C. F. A. Voysey and Baillie Scott, two English architects who were contemporaries of Spencer.⁶

Another inspiration for this design may have been

Frank Lloyd Wright's own home in Oak Park, Illinois of 1889. Although Spencer's design has a steeper roof, there are many similarities. Both houses are shingled and feature diamond paned windows, saw tooth shingles, dentils, and living room bay windows. Each first floor plan divides the space into four distinct sections: living room with a bay window, dining room, hall, and kitchen. Further substantiation of Spencer's knowledge of Wright's home is seen in his use of a gradual, inviting staircase. This detail as well as the open floor plan is the precursor to the mature Prairie School designs by Wright and others, developing out of Queen Anne interiors. While Spencer never lost interest in English architecture, his early designs foreshadow the developing Prairie Style interior.⁷

Spencer was also one of the first progressive Chicago architects to respond to the Arts and Crafts movement.⁸ One of the concerns of this movement was developing well-designed, distinctive, economical housing for the middle class, a reaction to mass produced housing in the growing suburbs.⁹ The Chicago Arts and Crafts Society was founded in October of 1897, and many of the original Steinway Hall Prairie School architects—Myron Hunt, Frank Lloyd Wright, Spencer, and Dwight H. Perkins—were charter members.¹⁰ Even though the Robinson House appeared in print in 1912, its 1897 construction date coincides with the Arts and Crafts fervor in Chicago.

Beginning in 1900, Spencer and other Prairie School architects contributed plans to such journals as *The Ladies Home Journal*, *House Beautiful*, and *The Architectural Record*. Between 1905 and 1910, Spencer published more than twenty articles in *House Beautiful*.¹¹ In these articles he advocated economy, simplicity, and texture rather than applied ornament. By the time the Robinson House was published in *The Architectural Review* in 1912, there was a growing movement toward the standardization of housing design. In fact, in addition to acknowledging standardization in his design, Spencer also invented several early devices for casement window openings and founded the Chicago Casement Hardware Company in 1906.¹² Wright and Spencer were among the early proponents of such architectural uniformity. Indeed, the Robinson House represents a controlled individuality, with decoration used sparingly to simplify the whole.

In 1905 Spencer formed a partnership with Horace Powers. Three Maine projects by the partners were not executed. One was for interior alterations to the Central Church in Bath.¹³ The other two involved Ira M. Cobe of Chicago. In March of 1909 the *Industrial Journal* of Bangor announced that Spencer

& Powers had planned a \$75,000 cottage for Cobe at Northport. Cobe's original summer house had been built on the Northport shore in 1899 from designs by A. G. Brown of Chicago.¹⁴ The *Journal* noted that Cobe had acquired a desirable hillside site and wanted a new cottage there. However, this project became delayed. Instead of executing Spencer & Power's plans, Cobe returned to them in September of 1910 for drawings to double the size of his existing summer house. Like the earlier project, this one remained unrealized.¹⁵ In 1913 Cobe commissioned another Chicago firm, Marshall & Fox, to create a large scale Colonial Revival mansion for his hillside location. Completed in 1914, this house is very different in character from the work of Spencer & Powers.¹⁶

When the partnership ended in 1923, Spencer practiced alone until 1928. He then taught architecture at Oklahoma A & M College and the University of Florida. He retired to Arizona in 1938, dying on September 9, 1953.¹⁷ Like Wright, he was born in Wisconsin and died in Arizona.

Though not as radical as Frank Lloyd Wright, Robert C. Spencer did much to support the architectural reforms in Chicago which the Prairie School espoused, and in 1909 the A.I.A. conferred the honor of fellowship on him.¹⁸ His designs for houses, like Plan B for the Robinson House, brought housing to the middle class in a distinctive manner.

Thomas C. Jester

NOTES

- ¹ *Construction News*, Chicago, May 1, 1915.
- ² Boston Directories.
- ³ For specific information on the Steinway Hall architects, see H. Allen Brooks, *The Prairie School*, Toronto, 1972, pp. 28-31. For Spencer's article on Wright, see *The Architectural Review*, Vol. 7, 1900, p. 61.
- ⁴ *Bath Daily Times*, March 3, 1949, W. W. Robinson obituary. Spencer also spent some time in the Bath area photographing farmsteads for an article entitled, "American Farmhouses", which appeared in *The Brickbuilder* in September, 1900.
- ⁵ The house also appeared in the second part of the same article published in the September, 1912 issue and in *House and Garden*, Vol. 17, 1910. Drawings for the Robinson House are in the possession of William E. Hill, Nagatuck, Connecticut.
- ⁶ Brooks, p. 91.
- ⁷ James D. Kornwolf points out in *M. H. Baillie Scott and the Arts and Crafts Movement* that Wright and Spencer's interior design is more advanced than either architect's exteriors in this early period. Kornwolf, p. 371.
- ⁸ Kornwolf, pp. 371-373.
- ⁹ Wendy Kaplan, "The Art That is Life": *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America*, Boston, 1987, Catalogue Entry #197.
- ¹⁰ Brooks, p. 17.
- ¹¹ *Prairie School Architecture: Studies from the Western Architect*, edited by H. Allen Brooks, Toronto, p. xvi.
- ¹² Paul E. Sprague, *Guide to Frank Lloyd Wright and Prairie School Architecture in Oak Park*, Chicago, 1978, p. 92.
- ¹³ Plans for the Central Church alterations are in the collection of the Maine Maritime Museum, Bath.
- ¹⁴ *Industrial Journal*, Bangor, March, 1909. Blueprints for A. G. Brown's design of the Cobe cottage are in the possession of the Crowfoot Family, Northport.
- ¹⁵ Blueprints for Spencer's unexecuted cottage addition are in the possession of the Crowfoot Family, Northport.
- ¹⁶ National Register nomination for second Cobe Cottage, Northport.
- ¹⁷ Sprague, p. 92.
- ¹⁸ *Construction News*, Chicago, May 1, 1915.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY ROBERT C. SPENCER, JR.

William W. Robinson House, 21 Old South Place, Bath, 1897, Extant.
Central Congregational Church, Alterations, Bath, circa 1900, Not Executed.
First Ira Cobe Cottage, Alterations, Northport, 1909, Not Executed.
Second Ira Cobe Cottage, Northport, 1910, Not Executed.

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

Drawings for the Robinson House and the two Cobe Cottage projects are privately owned. Color renderings of the Congregational Church project are at the Maine Maritime Museum, Bath.

Photograph of Robert Spencer
Architectural Review, May, 1915

Volume VI, 1991

Published by
Maine Citizens for Historic Preservation
Box 1198, Portland, Maine 04104

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Editor
Roger G. Reed, Associate Editor